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ABSTRACT

The speaker, Executive Director of the National School Public Relations Association, points out the need for school public relations people to conduct surveys in their communities to determine public opinion about the schools. Such surveys are a base from which to construct a public relations program. Included in the presentation are some highlights from research concerning results of public opinion polls conducted from 1938 to 1978. (Author/IRT)

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BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE: HOW TO BEGIN

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Presentation by Dr. John H. Wherry, Executive Director
National School Public Relations Association
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The theme of this 25th National Seminar of the National School Public Relations Association is "Building Public Confidence: A Plan for the Future." For several years now the level of public confidence in education has been dangerously low and virtually every survey of NSPRA members and other school administrators shows that we are very much aware that we must have public confidence in order for our schools to function properly. Every topic at every session of this Seminar has been planned to contribute to our confidence building skills as public relations practitioners. In this presentation, I would like to address the topic, "Building Public Confidence: How to Begin."

To begin today, imagine with me for a moment that we are all school bus drivers assembled here on the first day of school. We are eager and ready to go. The buses are gassed up, washed, parked in orderly lines, and we are gathered together here early in the morning on this first day of school for a last-minute briefing.

Playing the role of Director of Transporation: "Let me remind you of the vital role you play as a member of the educational team. Let me remind you about the safety rules and of defensive driving. With a final reminder that courtesy is contagious, I urge you to go forth now and bring in the children. Pick them up on every street corner and driveway and bring them back to school. Don't miss anyone. Be cheerful all the time."

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AND I FORGET TO GIVE YOU ANY ROUTES! I simply say don't worry about routes.

"Whenever you see children, pick them up and bring them on to school. Take them to whichever school they say they go to. Do your best all the time. We've all got to work hard to do the job right, so let's go out there and get it done!"

That whole scene is pretty ridiculous, isn't it? We wouldn't think of having a transportation system without routes. It's a comic scene if ever there was one. Yet, all too often, that is almost exactly how we go about managing our school public relations program.

We say that every school employee is important, a vital member of the public relations team. We exort every one to remember their public relations role in everything they do. Be cooperative and cheerful, we say--BUT ALL TOO OFTEN, WE DON'T GIVE THEM ANY ROUTES. We have no overall plan to make everything work together.

A successful school public relations program must be well planned and carefully managed if it is to succeed. We must keep that in mind as we consider how to begin building a program of public confidence.

As we consider our plan, we find good advice in one of the opening chapters of NSPRA's newest public relations source book, BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE FOR YOUR SCHOOLS. The chapter is called "First Things First--What Do They Think? What Do They Know?" ...And it talks about public opinion polling--surveying.

The key point I want to make today is that before we can start building public confidence, before we can improve attitudes, before we can begin making adjustments to make sure our schools are acting in the public interest, we must know where we

stand right now. What is the current level of confidence? What attitudes exist now? How well do our publics feel their interests are being served? Unless we understand where we are starting, we can end up tilting with windmills, chasing shadows, making false assumptions, and simply wasting time.

On the other hand, once we know where we are strong and where we are weak, we can put our public relations skills to work.

I recently had the opportunity to work with several NSPRA members in a small Missouri community to make recommendations for a public relations program following a public opinion survey. The survey showed that more than 80% of the community thought the schools were doing an excellent job. Obviously, the task in that situation is to maintain those positive attitudes. There was little need to spend lots of energy improving an already excellent rating.

As PR practitioners, we know that different situations call for different techniques:

--We can create attitudes where none exist.

--We can intensify existing positive attitudes.

--We can convert existing negative attitudes.

--And we can sometimes negate persistent negative attitudes as well.

But as the growing literature in public relations and social science tells us, the techniques are quite different. They require careful planning and we must know what we are trying to do. To say it once again, we've got to start with a survey.

I would like to share some things we have learned from national public opinion surveys about education. A year-long NSPRA study of public opinion research has been carried out with the assistance of Yvonne Beseler, a special NSPRA staff member made available through an internship program sponsored by the University Council for Educational Administration.

In the past year, we have reviewed virtually all available national public opinion polls about education taken from 1938 to 1978. A major source of poll information was the Roper Public Opinion Research Center at Williamstown, Massachusetts, which serves as a clearinghouse for more than 117 opinion research organizations. Other sources included the Harris Survey, the annual Gallup Polls on Public Attitudes Toward Education carried out each year since 1969, the General Mills American Family Report, the recent survey by Better Homes and Gardens--"What's Happening to the American Family?", and the Condition of Education Reports, 1975-1978, prepared by HEW's National Center for Education Statistics.

We reviewed computer printouts covering hundreds of poll questions, selected nearly 100 questions for careful analysis, and here are some of our major findings.

Major Findings
National School Public Relations Association
National Public Opinion Poll Research
July 1978

- Consistently since 1969 a majority of people say they would like to have more information about their schools.

(Gallup)	1969	1970	1974
	60%	54%	54%

- There is strong evidence that the American public regards education (in Gallup's words) "as the royal road to success."

(Gallup)	1973	(Harris)	1976
	76%		89%
Education is "extremely important" to one's future success		Quality of education for children "very important" in making quality of life better in this country (highest of any factor listed)	

- Public satisfaction with the performance of their schools since 1943 by various surveys shows as low as 28% were satisfied in 1946 (and an astounding 67% had no opinion). After World War II, with the baby boom and many GI's enrolled in school under the GI Bill, satisfaction rose to 82% in 1955 (with only 1% having no opinion). After Sputnik, satisfaction dropped to 73% in 1965 and then to 62% in 1973. In a slightly different rating system, 64% rated their schools A or B in 1974, and 54% in 1977. Very few, 3-7%, have had "no opinion" in recent years. (National Opinion Research Center, Gallup)

- A June 1978 Better Homes and Gardens report based on response of 300,000 readers to September, October 1977 survey in the magazine found that 60% would rate the quality of education being offered in the schools in their community either "good" or "very good."

- About the same percentage of adults in 1948 and 1973 thought children were getting a better education than they did--61% both times. (Gallup)

- Various Gallup polls show a steady increase in public sentiment for a standard nationwide test for high school graduation.

	1958	1961	1965	1976
Yes	50%	47%	48%	65%
No	39%	44%	43%	31%
No opinion	11%	9%	9%	4%

- Fewer people in a 1975 U.S. Chamber of Commerce study thought schools were inadequate than any other neighborhood service listed (3.6%). Transportation--36%, shopping--13.3%, hospitals and health clinics--11.8%.

- In Gallup's annual survey of public attitudes toward the public schools, the percentage of people with children in school has delined from 44% in 1969 to 30% in 1977. Those with no children in schools have increased from 50% in 1969 to 66% in 1977.

- Public perception of what makes a good school has shown remarkable consistency since 1969 with quality of curriculum, teachers and school facilities generally leading the list from 1969-1977. (Gallup)

NOTE: While curriculum has remained a top concern, public standards in judging curriculum quality have obviously changed. Quote from 1969 Gallup analysis, "While a few would say they would judge a school on the basis of the emphasis given to the three R's, even more would say that a good school offers a wide variety of courses that are interesting to the students."

- Public Opinion about the major problems with which schools must deal has also been quite consistent since 1969. The top four problems have been and are:

(Gallup)
1. Lack of discipline
2. Integration/Segregation/Busing
3. Lack of proper financial support
4. Difficulty getting "good" teacher

NOTE: Public concerns over poor curriculum are growing. Concern over use of drugs is decreasing.

- Teachers see problems of discipline and student attitudes along with incompetent administration as tied for the problem hindering them most. (1975-76 Study, NEA)

- Secondary principals cite "student apathy," "parents' lack of involvement in school matters," and "parents' lack of interest in students' progress" as the most serious problems in their schools. (HEW/NIE/NASSP Study 1977)

- A 1973 Gallup poll finding seems borne out over and over in the evidence:

> "The more (survey) respondents know at firsthand about the public schools, the more favorable are their views; the less interested and less well informed, the less favorable. Most important is the fact that persons who depend on the media for their information are most critical of the schools." (Gallup)

- The 1977 General Mills American Family Report showed that, "About four out of ten parents agree that one cannot count on the schools to teach children how to read and write" and in another finding, 42% of the parents surveyed would like help "understanding new classroom teaching methods."

- Confidence of the public in the people running education has varied, with recent increases. Percent stating they have "a great deal" of confidence in people running education:

1973	1974	1975	1976	1977
36.8%	49.0%	30.9%	37.2%	40.5%

(National Opinion Research Center)

- NSPRA's own Task Force on Building Public Confidence in Education meeting in November 1976 identified four basic reasons for the lack of public confidence in education:

1. Negative public experience with their schools
2. Public feeling that schools are not doing a good job teaching the basic skills they have come to expect from schools
3. The poor and ineffective job that has been and is being done to keep the public informed about education
4. A decreasing feeling of public responsibility for their schools

Other Facts with Implications for Building Public Confidence in Education

- The recent AASA demographic study completed under the direction of NSPRA president-elect Bill Henry (A Profound Transformation, AASA Slide-Tape, 1977) points out some important facts:

--Increasing number of elderly and generally older society

In 1800 half the people in the U.S. were 16 or younger. Today the median age is 29. By 1981 it will pass 30. By 2000 half our population may be 35 or older. By 1990 the number of people 55 and over will be larger than the school age group. Life expectancy was 47.3 years in 1900. In 1976 it was 73.1.

--Declining fertility and birth rates

In 1800 the fertility rate--the average number of lifetime births per woman was 7. By 1976 the rate hit an all-time low of 1.8 lifetime births per woman.

--Changing living patterns

In 1900 20% of all women were working or actively seeking jobs. Today the percentage is 47% and growing. The divorce rate has doubled since 1960. Each year now divorces equal almost half of the marriages performed. From 1970-75 the median price for new homes went up 95% from $23,000 to $45,000 while median income went up just 40%. Schools are likely to see many children from small families living in apartments.

--Shifting labor force composition

Unemployment has ranged from 3-8% since 1967 with 7-8% recently. But teenage unemployment is approaching 20% and as members of the baby-boom generation, they will soon flood the job market as young adults.

That's an overview of recently compiled facts and major national public opinion polls about education since the late 1930's. It is an interesting composite picture from thousands of individual communities.

But as we talk about building public confidence in education, we know that the work must take place in each of those communities. If public confidence is to be improved, the job must be done state by state, district by district, school building by school building. There is no other way.

Through our member newsletter, PARAGRAPHS, a few months ago, I asked NSPRA members to share recent school district attitude surveys that had been conducted --and they were quite interesting. Local surveys often agreed with national results. And specific community variations were most interesting. Many questions focused on specific local issues. About half were conducted solely by district personnel and half by outside consultants or with consultant help.

The tradegy is that apparently very few local surveys have been conducted. Including surveys we already had on file, we have to date received less than 25 all together. Certainly there are many more. But even if we optimistically assume that there are 100 other recent surveys for every one we received, that's only 2,500 and there are more than 15,000 school districts in the U.S. alone.

The question we must ask as we consider where to begin the task of building public confidence is, "Do we know where we stand right now in our local communities?"

--What is the level of confidence?

--What attitudes exist now?

--How well do our publics feel their interests are being served?

--How much do they know?

--How much do they want to know?

I am not advocating school administration by public opinion poll. I am saying that a poll is the place to begin so that we can make effective plans to develop the kinds of attitudes we must have in order for our schools to function effectively.

Lots of help is available. Most colleges and universities have staff members with polling expertise. Your local library will have books on polling. In addition to NSPRA's book on "How to Conduct Low Cost Surveys," NSPRA's resource center at your national headquarters offers help as close as your telephone. We can give you the names of experienced NSPRA members willing to help, as well as summaries of procedures to follow to do-it-yourself. And we even have available a sophisticated survey Question Bank publication with updated, tested school survey questions designed to help you get the information you need on virtually any school topic.

To Conclude

I don't think it's being melodramatic to say that democracy's grand experiment in public education for all is today facing some of the most severe problems in its history.

I've told some of you before about a friend of mine in Washington named Joe Adams. Joe has quite a successful advertising and marketing agency. And not long ago, he was telling me about his long-standing campaign to help his employees see that the problems they faced in dealing with their clients were really opportunities. Over and over, Joe preached the message--problems are really opportunities.

He had been hammering the message home for some time, Joe told me, when one day one of the women on his staff came rushing into his office shouting, "Joe! Joe! We've got the greatest opportunity we've ever had!" "What is it?" Joe asked. And she said, "The building's on fire and the whole studio is in flames."

"You know," Joe told me, "that really was the biggest opportunity we ever had. The building burned to the ground but it was covered by insurance and we were able to rebuild the studio and the entire building to meet our exact specifications. And we're better off now than we've ever been."

In education today, many times it seems like "The building's on fire and the whole studio is in flames." We have so many problems that our opportunities appear almost limitless! But we do have the public's attention on education--a few years ago we didn't have that. It's a problem and a rare opportunity at the same time. And as the public's scrutiny of how tax dollars are spent grows more intense nationwide, our schools have the opportunity to make the best of that public attention. And we personally have the opportunity to show our employers how essential our services are as they look to see who is really important in day-to-day school operations.

As public relations executives, it is our job--we have a mandate--to become information brokers, to constantly gather facts from surveys and other sources and then aggressively help develop plans to make sure our schools are serving the public interest--that's the heart of public relations.

We must make sure our PR program includes every school employee and that we have our plans well organized and carry them out efficiently. As public relations executives, we have a crucial contribution to make and now is the time to begin.